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| (54) Title: STEPPED SURFACE DIFFUSER | | |
| (57) Abstract | | |
| <p>An optical device such as an overlay panel for a LCD display, comprises an element of light-transmitting material having a surface configured to form a stepped Fresnel prismatic structure. The light-transmitting material itself or ribbed light refracting element, said element incorporates an array of graded refractive index features adapted to impart light dispersing of diffusing characteristics to the light-transmitting material. In an alternative arrangement, the element of light-transmitting material has a layer configured to form a stepped Fresnel - type surface and an additional layer incorporating such an array of graded refractive index features.</p> | | |

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DESCRIPTION OF INVENTION

Title: " Stepped Surface Diffuser"

THIS INVENTION relates to a light diffusing sheet material having utility in various fields, including that of enhancing video displays, such as LCD displays.

In liquid crystal displays the bright image seen by the viewer is generated through the liquid cell either by light generated within the assembly by a back light or by the use of ambient light which is first transmitted through the cell and reflected at the rear of the cell, re-emerging through the cell to create a bright image. In this latter arrangement, due to the position of the viewer, the majority of light must be accepted off axis, preferably should not be further diffused on entering the display, and should preferably re-emerge on axis with some additional diffusion in order to provide an acceptable viewing cone. It is well known that Fresnel-like structures have the ability to re-direct light; as circular arrangements of facets to create lenses, or as linear arrangements of facets to create off axis effects. Structures of these types have been proposed incorporating materials with light diffusing characteristics, as described in US Patent No. 4911529, where the diffusive effect is provided by a so-called bulk diffuser comprising small particles of a material of a first refractive index dispersed in a matrix material of a second refractive index. Such materials are described in, for example US Patent No. 4983016, EP-A-0464499 or EP-A-0843203. An important characteristic of such bulk diffuser materials is that the amount of diffusion taking place within a given composition is dependant on

the thickness of material through which the light travels. As a result, light entering an assembly containing such material off axis becomes more diffuse and reduced in intensity than light which enters on axis.

According to the present invention there is provided an optical device comprising an element of light-transmitting material having a surface thereof configured to form a stepped, Fresnel-type light refracting element, such light transmitting material incorporating an array of integral graded refractive index structures adapted to impart light dispersing or diffusing characteristics to said light-transmitting sheet material or the element having a layer configured to form said stepped surface and an additional layer incorporating such an array of integral graded refractive index structures.

In certain instances, it may be desirable to render one surface of said element reflecting or partially reflecting by coating with a material with the necessary optical properties, such as a metal applied by deposition or sputtering.

The sheet material may comprise, for example, a photopolymer, in which the graded refractive index features are formed by exposure of a precursor of the material, (such as a monomer) to appropriate radiation in a predetermined pattern so as to produce localised variations of light intensity within the material and hence localised variations in degree of polymerisation and thus in refractive index. As another example, the material may be dichromated gelatine (DCG), in which the desired graded refractive index features are formed by exposure of the material itself to such a radiation pattern, to produce an equivalent effect. Such materials, correctly processed, possess the previously described desirable optical characteristics. The process techniques used may, for example include, those disclosed in EP-0294122 or EP-0801767 or US Patent No. 5695895 or GB-A-1499135. These types of diffusing materials may

themselves have off axis or asymmetric characteristics, as described in EP 0768565, which can further enhance the off axis effects generated by the Fresnel structure. Methods of producing sheets of light diffusing material in which the light-diffusing characteristics are due to refractive index variations within the material are known and will not be discussed in greater detail here. These known methods, however, are directed to the production of either planar light-diffusing sheets or light-diffusing sheets having a surface configuration in the form of a plurality of convex domes, for example, adapted to enhance the diffusive characteristics of the material.

Embodiments of the invention are described below with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:-

FIGURE 1 is a view, in section perpendicular to the plane of major extension of the material, of a first embodiment of the invention,

FIGURES 1a and 1b are corresponding views of variants each having a reflective coating,

FIGURE 2 is a view, partly in section and partly in perspective of another form of light-diffusing sheet in accordance with the invention,

FIGURES 2a and 3, 3a and 3b are sectional views similar to Figure 1, showing specific examples of materials in accordance with the invention,

FIGURE 4 is a graph showing diffusive characteristics for various materials, and

FIGURES 5a to 5h are diagrams similar to Figure 1 showing various different ribbed profiles which may be adopted in embodiments of the invention.

In the embodiments of the present invention shown in the drawings, the device has the general form of a sheet 13 of light diffusing material, one surface of which is provided with a stepped or grooved configuration, after the fashion of a Fresnel lens or prism. As a result, the device, in addition to its diffusive characteristics, also has a directional characteristic in the sense that, if a parallel beam of light is directed on the sheet from one side thereof, the polar distribution of the diffused light emerging from the device has a peak along a direction which differs from the direction of the axis of the incident beam by an angle representative of the deviation imparted by the prismatic component due to the Fresnel prism surface configuration. The stepped surface of the device has, in cross-section, as shown in the Figures, a saw-tooth profile section, comprising major facets or ramps inclined typically at 10° to 20° to the general plane of the sheet, and minor facets extending generally perpendicular to said plane.

In the example shown in Figure 1, a light beam entering the material from below, normal to the (planar) lower surface is shown as passing through the material undeviated to pass through one of the facets of the Fresnel structure forming the upper surface, to be refracted through a 5° angle. In the example shown, the Fresnel structure comprises a series of major facets each inclined at 10° to the plane of the lower surface. It will, of course, be understood that these figures are merely exemplary. It will also be understood that the illustration of Figure 1 neglects the diffusive effect of the material. Taking this effect into account, it will be appreciated that the overall effect, for a parallel beam entering the material along the ray path indicated, is to produce, within

the material, a spreading or scattering of light in a polar distribution with an intensity peak along the ray path shown.

Referring to Figure 1b, an arrangement is shown which is similar to that of Figure 1 except that the stepped upper surface is rendered reflective, for example by metallisation e.g. applied by vapour deposition or by sputtering. The incorporation of a reflecting surface removed from the surface through which the light enters the assembly, causes the light, initially entering the material from below at a significant (35° - 40°) angle to the normal, to be reflected at the reflective facets, passing through the material a second time to become more diffuse before emerging substantially on axis, that is to say emerging as a dispersing "bundle" of rays in a distribution having a maximum along the normal to the planar face. In some embodiments, the reflecting surface may be only partially light reflecting and may be partially light transmitting, instead of being fully light reflecting. Such a "transflective" material can be useful eg. with displays which can be alternatively front-lit or back-lit.

Figure 1a shows an arrangement similar to that of Figure 1b, except that the light transmitting layer provided with the Fresnel-faceted surface (and which layer is indicated at 22 in Figure 1a) is of non-diffusive, transparent material and the desired diffusive effect is provided by an additional layer, referenced 23, of light-diffusing material. In the embodiments of Figures 1a and 1b

described above, in which reflecting coating is used, that coating is applied to the corrugated or faceted surface of the material, arranged as the rear surface of the screen, in order to secure a more pronounced off-axis effect. However, the reflective coating may, of course, be applied to the flat surface of the device, again arranged as the rear surface.

Figure 2 shows, partly in section and partly in perspective, a light-diffusing, light-transmissive sheet in accordance with the invention, comprising a layer 32 having a Fresnel stepped or faceted surface, and a flat substrate layer 33. The layer 32 may be of light-diffusing material and substrate 33 of transparent non-diffusive material, such as polyester or polycarbonate, or, similarly to the arrangement of Figure 1a, the layer 32 may be non-diffusive and the layer 33 diffusive.

Fig. 2a shows a specific example of an arrangement corresponding to that of Figure 2 wherein the Fresnel structure has a pitch of 50 microns and a facet angle of 10 degrees. Again, neglecting, initially, the diffusive characteristics of the material, a light beam entering on axis (i.e. normal to the "plane" of the material), exits at 5° to the normal.

Fig. 3 shows an embodiment similar to that of Figure 1 and having, by way of example, a Fresnel structure the pitch of which is 50 microns with a facet angle of 20 degrees. Fig. 3a shows a structure of the same pitch and facet angle, and shows additionally, for illustration, different ray paths through the light diffusing material 13. Figure 3b shows a structure similar to that of Figure 2a, but in which, however, the substrate layer, referenced 43, is a layer incorporating graded refractive index features arranged to impart a net deflective effect upon light passing therethrough as well as, typically, diffusing the light passing therethrough. Thus, in the example illustrated, light entering

the layer 43 normal to its exposed lower (in the figure) surface, is subjected to a net, or average deflection of 20° . The Fresnel-faceted layer referenced 42, in this case may simply be transparent and non-diffusive or may itself be light-diffusing.

The ray diagrams in Figures 1 to 3b, as noted, neglect, for ease of illustration, the fact that the light-transmitting layers of the device are not simply transparent, but that one or each such layer has a light-diffusing character.

Thus, in place of the emerging ray illustrated, there will, in practice, be a dispersing "bundle" of rays in a distribution having a maximum along the emerging ray path illustrated.

The stepped surface in the above embodiments may define, in effect, a plurality of precisely parallel similar V-section grooves extending across the sheet material so that, neglecting the diffusive features, the material acts as a thin prism. Alternatively, however, the grooves and ridges defined by the stepped surface may extend in circles or arcs and be of a form corresponding to that of the stepped surface of a Fresnel lens, whereby the refraction or reflection at the stepped surface will tend to "focus" the diffusive light provided thereby. In addition, the presence of the diffusing material will mask the discontinuities in the Fresnel structure to the viewer.

In the preferred embodiments discussed, the light diffusing character of the light diffusing layer arises as a result of incorporating an array of graded refractive index features, for example graded refractive index microlenses or other features. These graded refractive index microlenses preferably have each

a transverse dimension, i.e. a dimension measured parallel with the major planes of the sheet, which is small in relation to the pitch of the corrugated surface, i.e. the spacing between, for example, peaks of adjacent ridges of the corrugated surface, the graded refractive index features being likewise closely spaced in relation to one another, so that, for example, the mean spacing between adjacent such features may be several orders of magnitude less than the pitch of the corrugations on the surface. In the examples discussed, the graded refractive index features typically have an average diameter of 5 microns spaced apart (centre to centre), by, for example, a distance of 8 microns. In each said graded refractive index feature, the refractive index may be substantially constant along any line perpendicular to the plane of the sheet but may vary with transverse position in the sheet material. Thus, in the case of a graded refractive index lens, the refractive index may vary with radial distance from the optical axis of the lens, as described in EP-A-0294122. In variants, however, the graded refractive index diffuser may have features aligned along axes which pass through the sheet material obliquely, so that whilst the refractive index may be substantially constant along any line parallel with such axes, and may vary with transverse position in a plane perpendicular to these axes, that plane will no longer be parallel with the plane of the material, and where the GRIN features are GRIN lenses, the principal axes of the lenses will be inclined to the perpendicular to the plane of the material.

Such a variant graded refractive index diffuser may in general exhibit an off-axis diffusion characteristic of its own .

Whilst in Figures 1a to 3b, the ribs or grooves formed on the surface of the material are shown as a series of identical ribs of identical sawtooth profile, the applicants have found that in some applications it can be advantageous to vary the rib profile over the sheet material. Thus, for example, as shown in Figures 5a to 5h, a wide variety of profiles may be adopted. For example, as shown in Figure 5a, alternate ribs in the series may have major flanks of different inclinations α and β with respect to the general plane of the base surface of the sheet material, (herein referred to as the base plane), for example 8degrees and 14 degrees, alternately. The crests of the ribs may be of the same height of or of different heights, as shown in Figure 5g. Again, as shown in Figure 5h, where rib faces of two different inclinations α and β are provided, these need not be provided on different ribs but may be provided as sections of different inclinations on the same ribs as shown. Similarly, each of a series of identical ribs, for example, may each have two, three or more portions of the same rib surface with different inclinations α , β and δ with respect to the base plane, cf. Figure 5e and Figure 5h . Whilst the ribs may be of generally sawtooth profile with one side inclined significantly to the base plane and the other side more or less perpendicular to the base plane, (eg. inclined at 2 to 5 degrees to the perpendicular to the base plane), in some applications the two sides of each rib may be more or less equally inclined to the base plane, for example, as

shown in Figures 5b and 5c. Again, as illustrated in Figure 5f, one, (or each), flank of each or selected ribs may be concavely curved, (see Figure 5f), or convexly curved, (not shown). These measures make it possible to secure a product with a two - lobed or three-lobed diffusion characteristics, or with otherwise modified diffusion polar distributions.

The refractive index gradations in the light-diffusing material may be produced by photographic means, for example, by contact printing through an appropriate mask as described in EP-A-0294122. However, whereas in EP-A-0294122, for example, the optical mask utilised is preferably plane, for the purposes of the present invention, the optical mask may comprise, for example, a glass plate having the desired stepped configuration on one surface and having that one surface coated with a thin layer of, for example, metallic chrome, so thin as not to alter the corrugated character of the glass surface, the chrome layer being provided with an array of transparent windows or apertures etched therein by photo-etching techniques so as to form an optical printing mask. The stepped, chromed surface of the plate may then be pressed against the exposed surface of, for example, a layer of photopolymerisable monomer (destined to form the layer 33 of Figure 2, for example) on a transparent substrate, so as to form the desired corrugations by what is effectively an embossing technique. Alternatively the photopolymerisable material may be cast on the stepped chromed surface. The layer of photopolymerisable monomer, still in contact with the glass plate or mask, may then be exposed to polymerising light through such mask. Thereafter, and after a subsequent blanket exposure to polymerising light, for example directed through the

transparent substrate, the plate may be separated from the finished product. Alternatively, the diffuser/Fresnel lens or prism combination can be created a two step process; forming a planar diffuser as previously described then embossing the Fresnel structure into one surface using a combination of heat and some pressure. In this instance the embossing may be effected using a copper die, formed by machining the Fresnel structure into the surface of a copper plate using a diamond tool. Whilst the above description, and EP-A-0294122, make reference to the use of photopolymer as the material in which graded refractive index features are induced by exposure to appropriate light or other radiation, other materials in which refractive index variations can similarly be induced by such exposure, may be used utilising the same exposure techniques. Thus, for example, dichromated gelatine (DCG) may be used as the material in which graded refractive index lenses or other graded refractive index features are induced to impart light diffusing characteristics to the device.

It is preferable, particularly where the devices are to be used in conjunction with LCD displays, that the device in accordance with the invention or the several layers thereof, should be non-birefringent, i.e. should be polarisation-maintaining.

A particular use of a material in accordance with the invention is as an overlay for front-lit LCD displays in, for example, portable telephones, portable computers etc., to allow the user to view the display from the optimum angle without obstructing incident light and without being troubled by extraneous surface reflections. In such an application of course, no reflective coating is utilised and the or each layer of the diffusing screen should be light-transmitting. In an arrangement such as illustrated in Figure 2, the substrate may be constituted by the, for example glass, cover plate of the LCD display.

Of equal significance are devices in accordance with the invention in which, as in Figures 1a and 1b above, one surface, usually the surface in which the Fresnel structure is present, is coated with a reflecting or partially reflecting coating, typically a metal such as aluminium. Devices of this type may be incorporated behind the liquid crystal cell in a display illuminated using ambient lighting.

In the arrangements of Figures 1a and 1b, light is diffused to a minimum extent on arrival at 35 to 40 degrees to the normal to the lower surface (i.e. the normal to the general "plane" of the material) but is diffused more strongly after reflection at the reflective coating, during the return passage through the diffusing material. These differences in diffusion and intensity are clearly shown in Fig. 4 where intensity and angle or view resulting from different light entry angles are compared. Thus, Figure 4 shows the characteristics of a planar sheet of graded refractive index light diffusing material. Graph A was derived by directing a beam of light through such sheet of material, arranged perpendicular to the beam axis and measuring the intensity of light (plotted along the Y-axis) emerging from the sheet on the opposite side thereof, along directions at various angles (plotted along the X axis) from the beam axis. Graph B was produced in the same way but with the sheet of graded refractive index diffusing material arranged with the normal to its plane angled at 35° with respect to the beam axis.

Whilst, in some of the embodiments described above, the graded refractive index features responsible for the diffusion of light are formed integrally with the material affording the stepped or faceted surface, in other embodiments within the scope of the invention the device is formed as a plurality (e.g. two, three or more) of distinct, superimposed layers, with one such layer, preferably

an outer layer, being of a transparent material of uniform refractive index but provided with the ramped or faceted refractive surface and another such layer, for example juxtaposed with the layer with the faceted surface, incorporating the graded refractive index features.

In embodiments such as shown in Figures 2,2a,3,3a,and 3b in which light may pass entirely through the stepped or ribbed surface, rather than being reflected at that surface, the stepped surface of the material 13, 32, or 42 may be covered by a layer of a transparent material with a refractive index significantly different from that of the material 13, 32 or 42, the covering material intimately conforming to the stepped or ribbed surface, without air-gaps and thus completely filling the grooves defined between adjacent steps or ribs, the covering material further providing, as its surface remote from the stepped or ribbed surface, a smooth planar surface of the resulting device which will, for example, make it easier to keep free from dust and dirt and facilitate lamination with other planar surfaces, eg. of parts of LCD or other displays. A similar technique for providing a device having planar surfaces whilst retaining optical effects due to predetermined surface configurations of light transmitting layers is disclosed in GB - A- 2314943, to which reference should be had.

CLAIMS

1. An optical device comprising an element of light-transmitting material having a surface thereof configured to form a stepped or ribbed light refracting and/or reflecting element, said element incorporating an array of graded refractive index features adapted to impart light dispersing or diffusing characteristics to said light-transmitting material, or the element having a layer configured to form said stepped or ribbed surface and an additional layer incorporating such an array of graded refractive index features.
2. An optical device according to claim 1 wherein said graded refractive index features are of a size which is small in relation to the spacing between adjacent steps or ribs of the stepped or ribbed surface of said element.
3. An optical device according to claim 1 or claim 2 wherein said element has the general form of an extended, generally planar sheet or layer, and said graded refractive index features each have an axis extending through said planar sheet or layer from one side of said generally planar sheet or layer to the other, each said graded refractive index feature having a graded refractive index distribution, in a plane perpendicular to its said axis, which is substantially the same in different such parallel planes at successive respective positions along such axis.
4. An optical device according to claim 3 wherein said axes are inclined with respect to the normal to said generally planar sheet or layer.

5. An optical device according to claim 4 wherein each said graded refractive index features is a lens having an optical axis corresponding to the first-mentioned axis thereof, the refractive index within said structure being substantially constant along a line parallel with said axis and varying with distance from said axis.
6. An optical device according to claim 5 wherein each said axis extends perpendicular to the plane of said planar sheet or layer.
7. An optical device according to claim 5 wherein at least some said axes are inclined with respect to the plane of said planar sheet or layer.
8. An optical device according to any preceding claim, wherein one surface of said material is coated with light-reflecting material.
9. An optical device according to claim 8 wherein the stepped surface is coated with light-reflecting material.
10. An optical device according to claim 9 or claim 10, wherein the coating of light reflecting material is such that the coated surface is partly light reflecting and partly light transmitting.

11. An optical device according to any preceding claim wherein, on said stepped or ribbed surface, the steps of or ribs are of saw-tooth form.
12. An optical device according to claim 11 in which the corresponding surfaces of adjacent steps or ribs are generally parallel so that the stepped surface is a Fresnel-type surface.
13. An optical device according to any of claims 1 to 7 in which the stepped or ribbed surface is covered with a second material of a refractive index significantly different from that of the first-mentioned light transmitting material, the second material providing a smooth, generally planar surface of the resulting device.
14. An optical device substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to, and as shown in, any one or more of the accompanying drawings.

1/6

Fig.1.

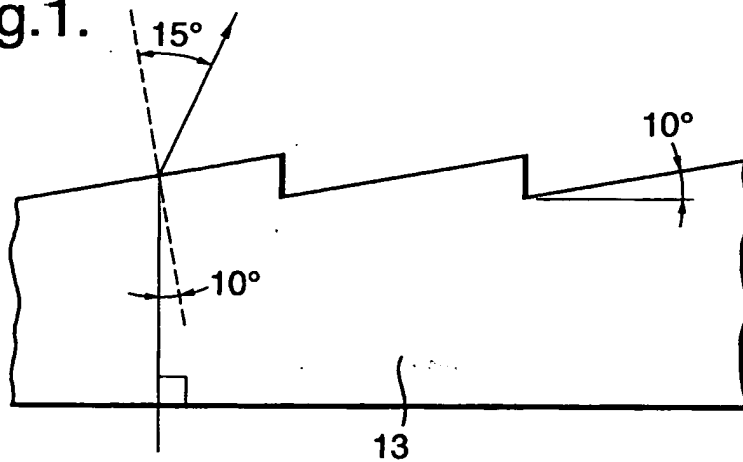


Fig.1a.

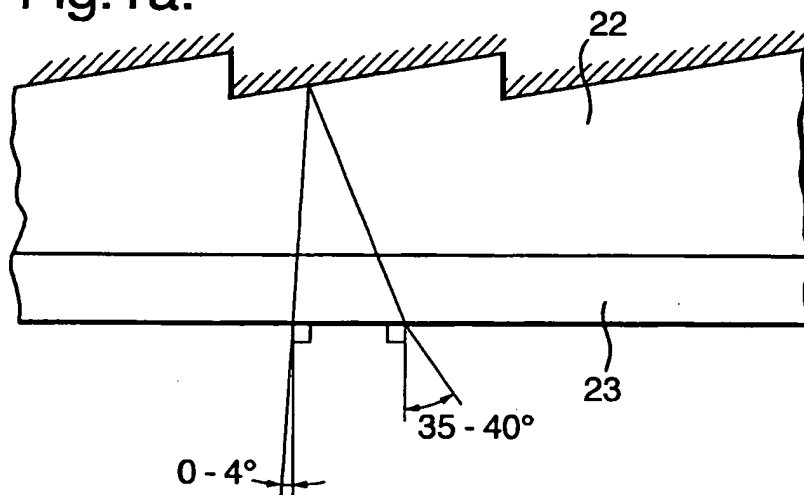
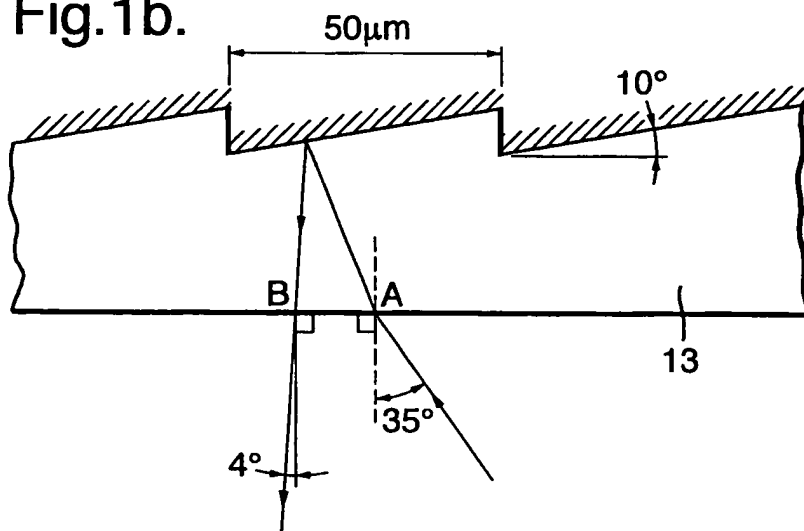


Fig.1b.



2/6

Fig.2.

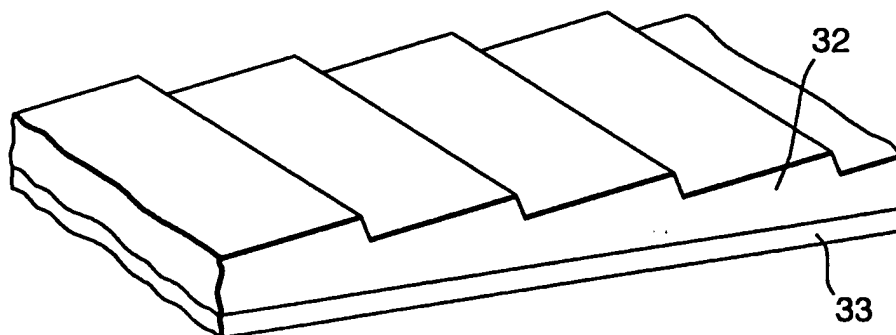


Fig.2a.

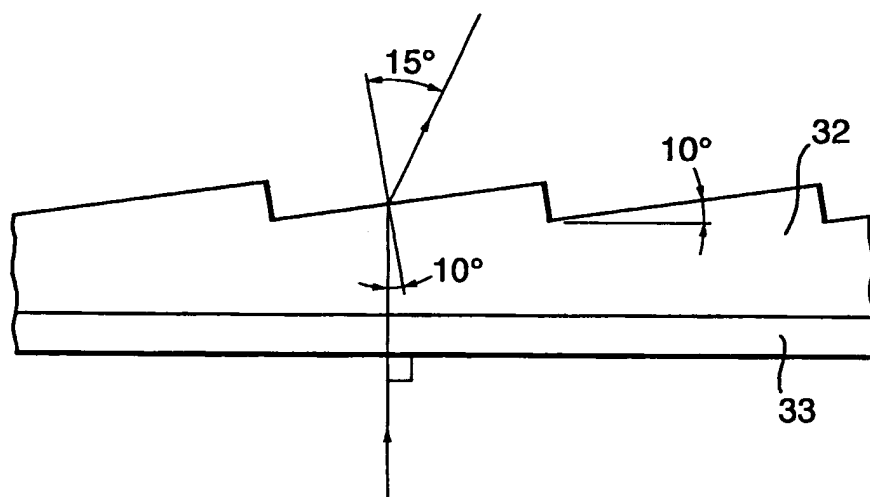


Fig.3.

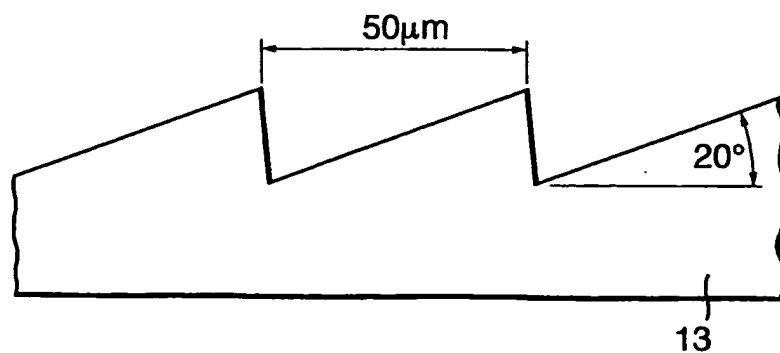


Fig.3a.

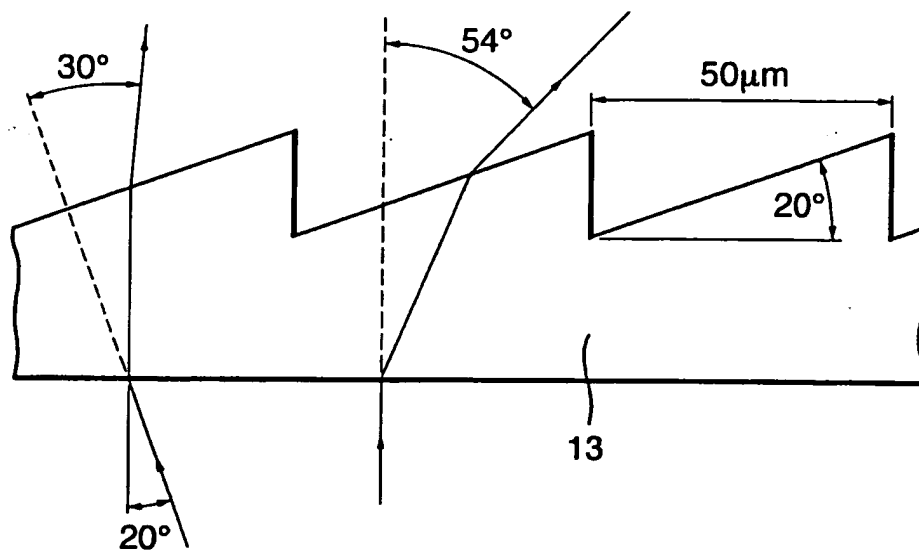
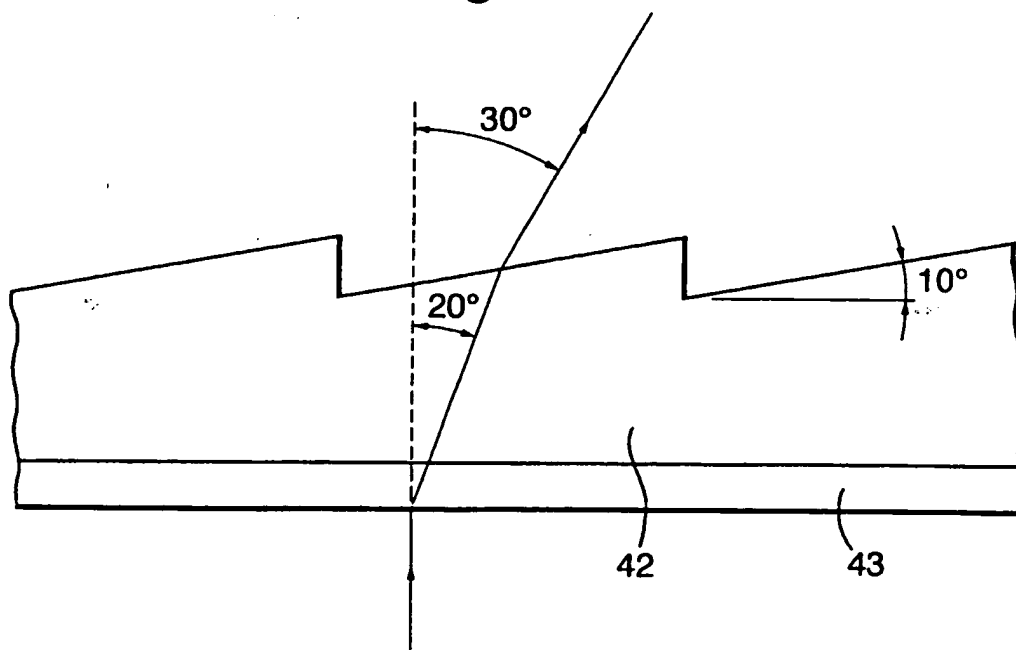
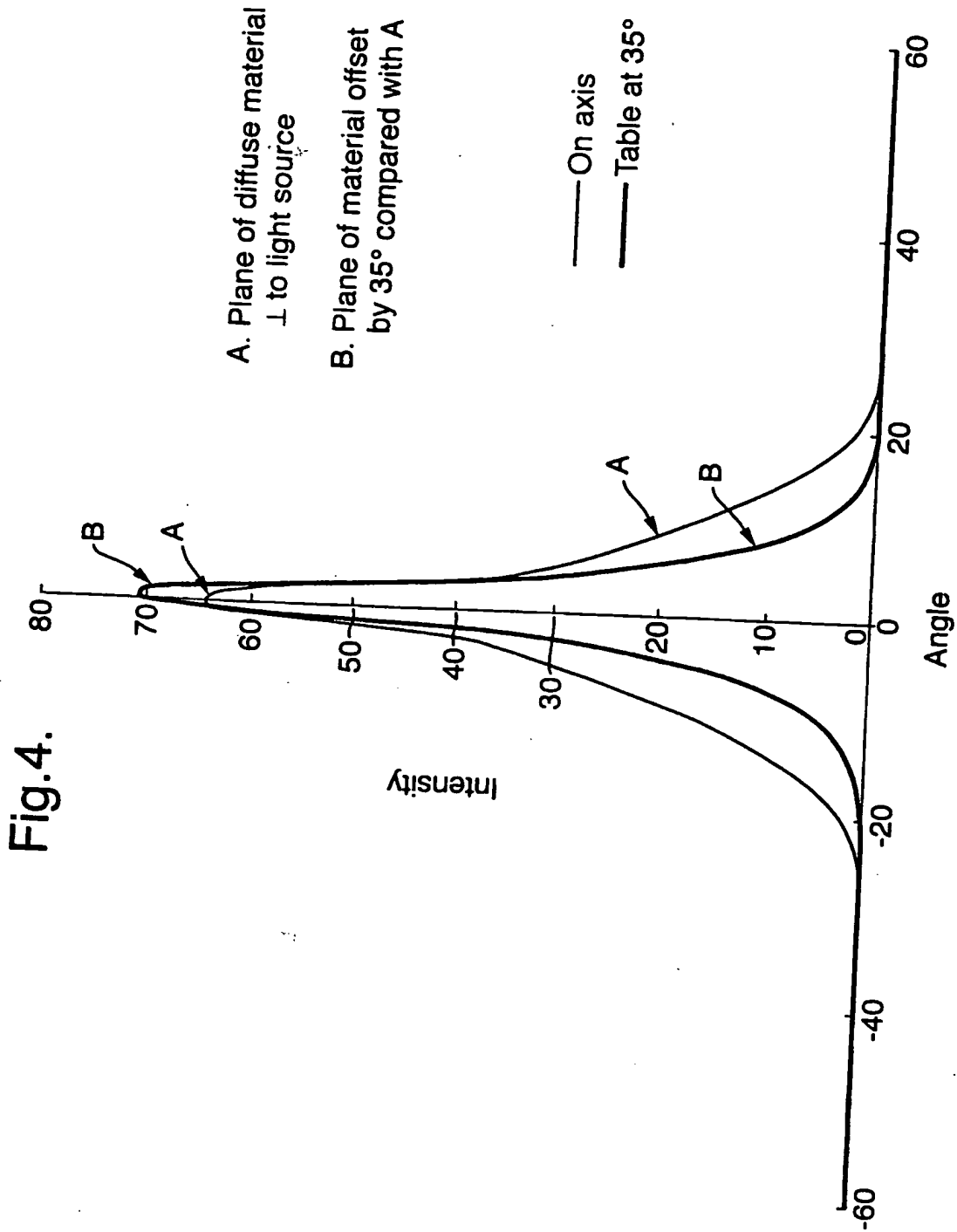


Fig.3b.





5/6

Fig.5a.

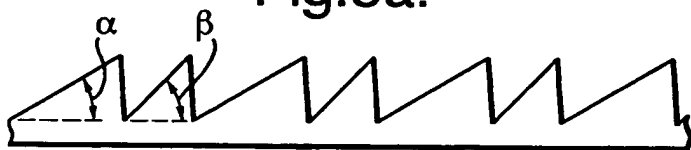


Fig.5b.



Fig.5c.



Fig.5d.

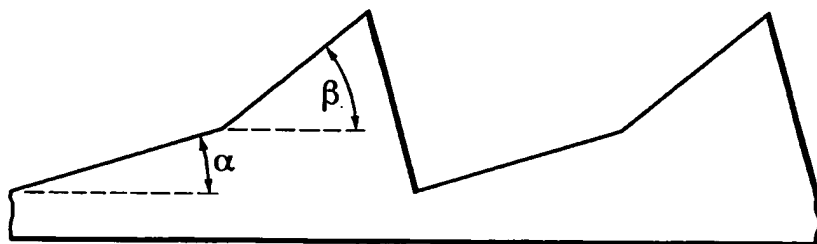


Fig.5e.

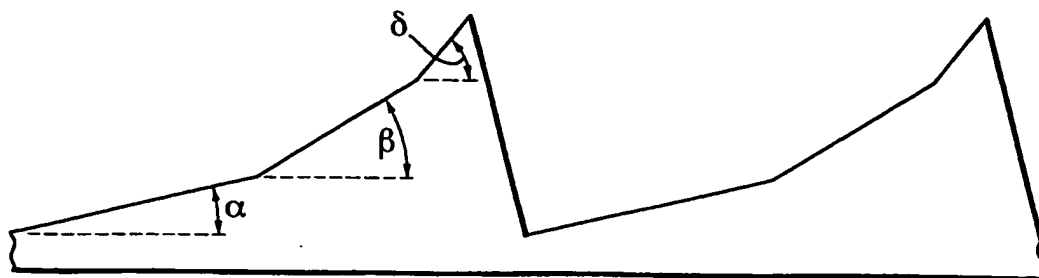


Fig.5f.



Fig.5g.

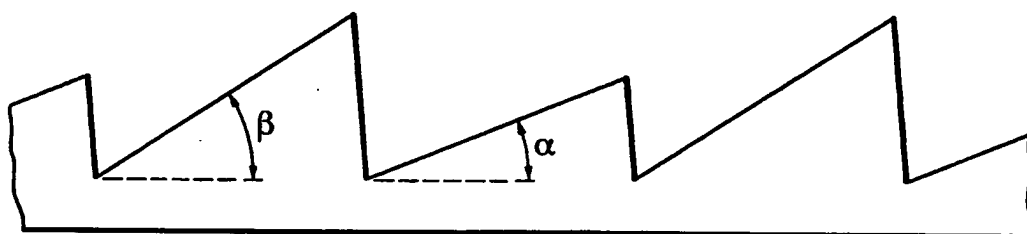
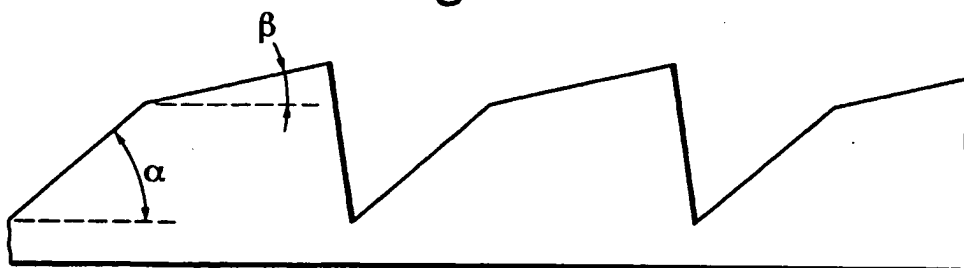


Fig.5h.



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No

PCT/GB 99/04432

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC 7 G02B3/00 G02B5/02 G02B5/04 G03B21/62

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

IPC 7 G02B G03B

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

| Category * | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
|------------|--|-----------------------|
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| Y | column 13, line 6-30; figures 3,7,8 | 8,11-14 |
| | column 3, line 46-51 | 2,4,7 |
| | column 16, line 49-59 | |
| X | US 5 751 387 A (FUKUHARA MOTOHIKO ET AL) 12 May 1998 (1998-05-12) | 1 |
| | column 5, line 24 -column 6, line 14; | |
| | figures 6-8 | |
| Y | US 4 911 529 A (BRADLEY RALPH HAMPTON ET AL) 27 March 1990 (1990-03-27) | 2 |
| | cited in the application | |
| | column 4, line 44 -column 7, line 52; | |
| | figures 3,5 | |
| | -/- | |

☒ Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.

☒ Patent family members are listed in annex.

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